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A Part of My Experience in Collecting.

BY LYMAN BELDING*

DURING the spring of 1876 I secured a volume of *California Ornithology* and began industriously to collect and identify the birds of this state. I had been an ardent sportsman ever since I was a small boy and had supposed that I knew most of the birds, but my first bird book astonished me with many I did not know and had never heard of. I had never met an ornithologist or oologist and did not know there were any in California. I had met several persons who could mount birds and I had mummified and mounted some, but I soon found that a mummy was not a joy forever if it was a thing of beauty when first mounted. I had no difficulty in identifying my specimens, but in order to be sure my identifications were correct, I sent specimens to Washington for Mr. Ridgway's opinion.

He and Prof. Baird gave me kind encouragement and Mr. Ridgway was very patient and prompt in writing long, interesting letters concerning the specimens I had sent. I was given many valuable books from the National Library, after which Prof. Baird sent me a catalogue of the publications it contained and told me to ask for anything I wanted. I was very grateful for these kind attentions and my zeal for the work was greatly stimulated. I

do not think this kind encouragement was exceptional, for I think Profs. Baird and Ridgway were always glad to assist the student of natural history.

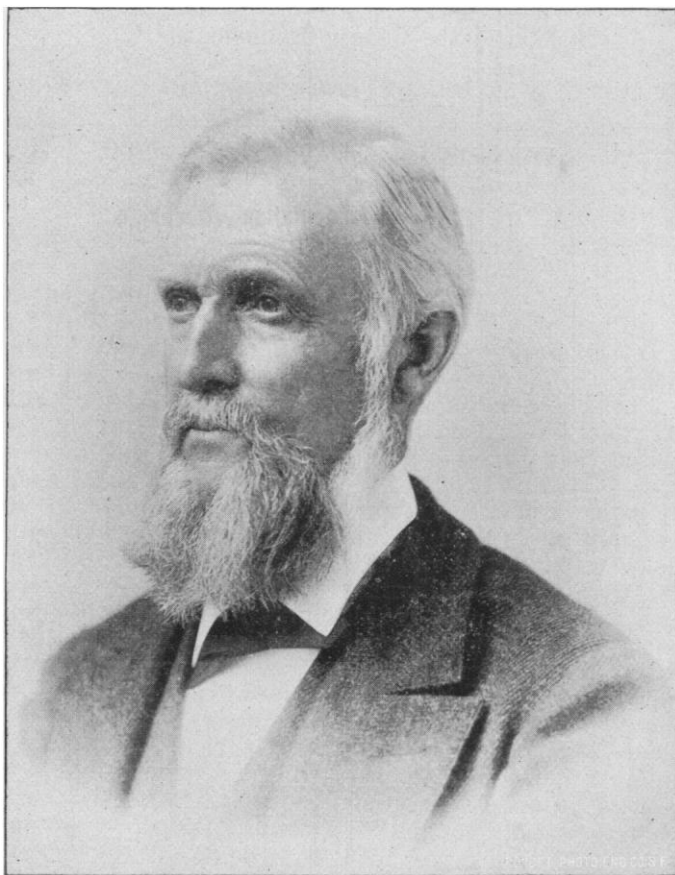
My success in identifying specimens was due, partly, to my already knowing many of the species and partly to the excellence of Baird's descriptions in *California Ornithology* and Vol. IX, *Pacific R. R. Reports*, and again, partly because many sub-species had not yet been recognized. I was sometimes materially assisted by Wilson's simple descriptions. Fortunately, my *California Ornithology* contained uncolored plates. I found more pleasure in identifying strange birds than in anything else, except, perhaps, collecting in the Sierra Nevadas. I need not explain this to those who love the woods and mountains. I never went on a collecting trip, especially the long ones, without taking some of my most needed books, and Vol. IX was always one of them.

In the spring of 1881, Messrs. Baird and Ridgway requested me to visit Guadalupe Island, and a sum of money was promised for 80 skins of the island birds. I went to San Diego intending to go to Guadalupe, but several persons who had been there sealing, advised me not to go. Mr. W. W. Stewart told me of Dr. Edward Palmer's experience there, who, with his son Harry Stewart, had nearly starved on the island; that the Mexican garrison had been removed and that I would find the island

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uninhabited. Reluctantly I gave up the voyage to Guadalupe and went to Cerros Island. Cerros or Cedros was the second objective point of my instructions. I found Cerros quite destitute of birds, and after staying there twelve days we went to Scammon's Lagoon for the purpose of collecting on

Quentin Bay where I spent ten days. We were compelled to anchor near the mouth of the bay and a long tramp was necessary to reach any good collecting ground. Consequently, when I returned to San Diego I felt that my voyage had been anything but successful, though I got the types of *Phalacrocorax*



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the peninsula. The surf was so dangerous we did not attempt to enter the lagoon. It was here that Mr. Anthony's schooner was wrecked in 1898.

From off Scammon's Lagoon we followed the coast northward, went ashore at Santa Rosalie Bay for a few hours, and then continued up the coast to San

dilophus albociliatus on Cerros, besides a new lizard or two, and at Coronada Islands during the last of the voyage I got Mr. Brewster's type of *Hematopus frazari*. At San Quentin Bay I first got specimens of the bird which Mr. Ridgway later named *Ammodramus beldingi*. As I had not strictly followed

my instructions, I paid the cost of the voyage (about \$500) and did not ask for any remuneration,—in fact, I have never received a cent for specimens or for any collecting I have done, nor would I have accepted money for my work.

During the winters of 1881-2 and 1882-3 I collected in the Cape region, from La Paz to Cape San Lucas, excepting the time that I was at Guaymas which was nearly all of December, 1882, and a part of April, 1883. My outfit from Washington did not accompany me to Guaymas and the Mexican customs officials would not pass it across the line at Nogales, but I afterward found it at La Paz, whence it had been forwarded from San Francisco by express. My collecting in the Cape region was satisfactory, notwithstanding some hardships I endured. The region is mostly a semi-desert, water is scarce and I several times suffered for the want of it. I made the mistake of collecting many things of which I knew little or nothing, instead of confining myself almost entirely to birds. Had I done this, one winter's collecting would have satisfied me quite as well as two.

I found San Jose del Cabo the best field of the low country and the Victoria mountains the best of the mountainous parts. I have often wondered why the sharp-eyed, indefatigable Xantus did not see *Geothlypis beldingi* on the San Jose river, where he spent a great deal of time, and also if it had rapidly changed since he was there some thirty years before. I do not think he was ever in the Victoria mountains or he would have found the very common *Junco bairdi* and other common birds of these mountains, which are known to the California Academy scientists as Laguna,—a decided misnomer—as the little lagoon that once existed at the lower end of a little valley, went down the mountain during a violent rainstorm which cut away a natural dam that held it. Then there are quite a number of lagunas or lagoons in the Cape Region.

The second time I was in the Cape Region I took only seventy or eighty bird skins, for I did not wish to get many. I consumed about a week of

this time in getting two specimens of the new rail, *Rallus beldingi*. I only heard of one man at La Paz who had ever seen one and several hunters were surprised when I showed them one of the birds. These birds can best be obtained at low tide when they move about in the mangrove thickets in search of food. I got my specimens by patiently waiting for them to pass comparatively open spots in the mangle. I rode sixteen consecutive days without skinning a bird, though I occasionally shot them when in doubt of the species. My collecting basket during that time contained two very interesting aboriginal skulls which Dr. ten Kate and I got in a cavern. I have travelled considerably in the northern part of the peninsula, having, on one trip, been absent from San Diego sixteen days. I was at Laguna, which is about sixty miles south of Campo, in May, 1885. I secured three specimens of *Sitta pygmaea leuconucha* at this laguna. A few days later I tried in San Francisco to get specimens of *S. pygmaea* to compare with them, but did not succeed in finding a solitary specimen. I then donated the specimens to the National Museum.

About this time I thought it time for me to stop ornithological study unless we could have a good study collection of bird skins in California, and thinking the Academy the right place for such a collection, I advised all or many of my California correspondents to contribute to the California Academy of Sciences. I believe that advice has borne some fruit, but not as much as it should have borne. I knew that under the trinomial system, *hair-splitting* would be almost without limit. I had noticed local differentiations, but could do nothing without many specimens for comparison, and after all, "was the game worth the candle?" I doubted it. As nearly as I remember, in 1876, only two Screech Owls were credited to the United States. Now there are about a dozen subspecies and the Horned Larks have multiplied in like proportion. I remember reading a good article in the *Auk* some years since, in which the writer, Dr. Allen, asks in substance if it is profitable to name these slight divergencies. Nevertheless much can be said in favor of

naming them,—quite as much as against it.

The pleasantest days I have spent since 1876 have been in the mountains of Central California. Since that time I have been in these mountains the most of each summer. I couple deer, grouse and quail hunting with bird study. At first I tried to connect botany with ornithology, but I could not look on the ground for plants and in the trees for birds at the same time. The ornithologist should, however, know the prominent plants at least. During my rambles I have noticed the hardness of some of our mountain annual plants. I have seen the mercury down to 22 degrees on two successive mornings and no trace of frost afterward, except that a few of the tenderest ferns were killed. I suppose this may be owing to dry air and cool nights, the latter preventing the rapid growth and consequent tenderness of kindred plants grown where both days and nights are warm.

The first eggs I collected were about on a par with my first bird skins. I picked a hole in each end with a pin, never having seen or heard of egg drills and blow-pipes. Eggs of Townsend's Solitaire and others quite as choice were thus punctured. I believe I took the first eggs of the Solitaire, which were sent to the National Museum. The nest is composed almost wholly of pine needles and can readily be distinguished from any other nest of the Sierras. It is usually on the ground, but I have seen one in a hole in a stump about a foot from the ground. Perhaps there is no part of the world more interesting than the high Sierras of Central California. Neither Heermann, Gambel or Xantus explored them. Mr. Bell got the Round-headed Woodpecker in Calaveras or Tuolumne county, but this he could have done at an altitude of 2500 feet or less in winter. Prior to 1876 these mountains had hardly been touched by the ornithologist, the route immediately along the Central Pacific Railroad and about Lake Tahoe being the only parts that had been visited. Considerable work had been done south of Tehachapi; Newberry had followed the Sacramento river to the Klamath Lakes and north-

ward and Capt. Feilner had collected at Fort Crook and about Mt. Shasta, but the mountains in the central part of the state had been neglected.

If any of the young ornithologists of this state have not visited these mountains in summer they should miss no opportunity to do so. My most interesting observations have been those of evenings and moonlight nights in some secluded part of the forest where large game was abundant. I have often heard the Pygmy Owl, which Mr. Ridgway correctly says is diurnal and crepuscular and have quite as often heard the Flammulated Owl, which is strictly nocturnal and hard to get. I have only taken one specimen. The Western Barred Owl has never ceased to interest me, for it is quite familiar and seems to have a fondness for *talking back!* By imitating its shrieks and dog-like barkings, I seldom fail to get a response. I have several times been near panthers when they screamed and I can say positively that the Sierra panther does scream, although the panther of the Adirondacks is said to be a silent animal, while that of the Cape region also screams. One screamed near our camp one night and our pack mule was so badly frightened that it rushed hurriedly to the camp-fire for protection. One night at the Calaveras Big Trees a panther gave several loud screams which were followed by low chest growls. Immediately every animal about the place was silent, although previously about two dozen bells on sheep and cattle in the corral had been tinkling, and a dozen or more horses on a board floor had been continually stamping. But the panther silenced every bell and hoof, and the silence continued several minutes. I have seen a yearling deer crouch motionless fully half an hour after a panther screamed about one hundred yards away. I was sitting in the bushes near a deer lick and the deer was about twenty-five feet from me. The panther probably catches fawns and young deer by terrifying them. I have caught fawns by yelling at them.

The high Sierras have been explored but little in winter. I have been in the lower edge of the fir or pine belt

the most of ten or eleven winters and have several times gone as high as 5,000 feet, but these higher ascents were only when there was but little snow. About the middle of November some years ago I was at the summit of the Central Pacific Railroad, altitude 7,000 feet. The ground was mostly bare and I saw only a few birds and fewer animals, the Little Chief hare being one of the latter. The reptiles and batrachians were sleeping their long annual sleep which covers fully two-thirds of the year at this height, and the sleep of the marmot and some of the small animals is nearly as long. A few asters and *Sidalcea* were in flower in protected situations.

Summit is a good locality for making winter observations but when the snow is from ten to twenty feet deep, as it usually is in winter, snow-shoes would be a necessary part of the observer's outfit and snow-blindness must be guarded against. I hope this mere outline of my experiences in collecting will interest the young ornithologists of the Academy, and in closing will say that, owing largely to the good influence of the Stanford and State Universities, scientific study is now much better appreciated by the people of California than it was when I began, in my crude way, to study ornithology.

The Varied Thrush in Summer.

BY JOSEPH GRINNELL.

[Read before the Southern Division of the Cooper Orn. Club, Nov. 25, 1899.]

THE Varied Thrush (*Hesperocichla naevia*) is pre-eminently a bird of the West, being confined principally to the Pacific Coast from Alaska to California. It is a familiar winter visitant throughout the southern coast region, and here in Southern California it often appears in late fall in very large numbers in the foot-hills, feeding on the berries of the California holly. The summer home of this bird has been considered to be mainly north of the United States and chiefly within the heavily wooded Sitkan District, but ranging northward less commonly through the Yukon Valley. I found the Varied Thrush breeding in moderate numbers at Sitka, Alaska in the summer of '96. But I was rather surprised to find the species a much more numerous breeding bird in the Kowak Valley in northwestern Alaska, which is the extreme north of its range. In the spring of 1899 it appeared commonly in almost every tract of spruces, as near the coast of Kotzebue Sound as the first timber in the Kowak Delta, about ten miles east of Hotham Inlet. On May 28 I found it nest-building near upper timber-limit on the base of the Jade Mountains, on the northern border of the Kowak Valley and near the head of Hunt River.

At our winter camp which was lo-

cated near the confluence of Hunt River and the Kowak, about 175 miles east from the mouth of the latter, the first Varied Thrush arrived on the 21st of May, when the twanging notes of the males were heard several times during the morning and evening. The next day they had arrived in full force, and were to be seen and heard in every heavy stretch of woods. The snow had by this date nearly all disappeared, though the rivers and lakes were still covered with ice. Their food at this season consisted largely of wild cranberries and blueberries which were left from the previous summer's crop, and had been preserved under the winter snows. The birds were quite lively for members of the thrush tribe, which are usually of a quiet demeanor. When not feeding on the ground in one of the fruitful openings in the forest, they would be seen in wild pursuit of one another, either courting or quarrelling. The males were often seen in fierce combat, that is, fierce for a thrush. Of course some female ensconced in a thick evergreen in the vicinity was the cause of the dispute. I never saw just how a quarrel would commence. The swift pursuit would follow a tortuous route, twisting among the close-standing trees and across openings, so rapidly as to be difficult to follow with the eye. The